OPENED BY MISTAKE

By NAN LORD and CHESTER KANE

ON Tuesday morning the mail-coach brought in the well-substantiated rumor that Buckton had really been located again—this time in the foothills beyond the Star-Y range. By noon on Tuesday—and this despite the fact that Buckton had been definitely located five times in the last two months, without ever being taken in the flesh—Sheriff Bull galloped out of Phillipstown with a posse of seven behind him. Phillipstown may not be strong on population or culture or commerce, but when it comes to sending out a sheriff's posse in good shape at short notice, Phillipstown is there!

Just before sunset on Thursday they came upon Buckton.

Buckton was sitting, hunched into a miserable ball, just as he had fallen when the spunky little black mare dropped dead six hours before. He was the God-forsaken wreck of a man, hardly over thirty.

What clothes he still owned were tattered; scantily covered bones literally protruded through the rents and holes. His hat was crownless; the straggling beard of weeks gave his gaunt face much the look of the traditional "wild man." His thin hands were clenched over bare knees. His cheeks cracked suddenly into a smile nothing less than ghastly.

"You've got me, Bull," he said. "I never thought you had wits enough for the job, but—you've got me. Go ahead with your fun. What do you want?"

Pell, the Phillipstown grain and feed man, took the liberty of laughing. Bull's official dignity came back, and he straightened up suddenly.

"I've got a warrant here for your arrest, Buckton," he said. "In fact, I have four of them, but the last's the one I'm going to use. They charge you with horse-stealing and cow-rustling. One of 'em's been sworn out on a complaint of smashing down a bank-clerk in Kinsville and taking three hundred dollars from him in broad daylight. Here they are, if y' want to read 'em."

"I'll take your word for it, Bull." The weird smile came again.

"Then—"

The derelict hitched to a little more upright posture and faced the man.

"Bull," he said, "I'm not going with you. I'm not dead sure about the law, but you know blamed well you're out of your own county and—"

And just there Menken, seven-foot giant of the posse, keeper of Phillipstown's most ornate saloon and leader of the councilmen, roared in:

"You bet you ain't goin', Buckton! You're goin' to stay right here and stay put! We've had too darned much trouble with you, anyway, these last two months, an' too much expense. You ain't worth cartin' back, an' you'd be worth less when you got there. Where's that rope, Tom?"

The red-headed member of the posse tossed from his saddle a good ten yards of braided leather lariat. Menken caught it and held it up silently. Buckton, still squatted on the ground, regarded it apathetically.

But Bull whirled swiftly on the saloon-man with:

"What d' you think you're doing—"

"That'll be all right, Dick!" Menken grinned. "We talked it over before we started, and we came ready. You're all for law in the book style, old man, and we're all awful up to date; but I reckon the day ain't gone by when hoss-thieves don't get what's coming to 'em in proper style. And if this cuss don't deserve hangin'—"

A six-throated yell drowned his voice. It was a yell of distinct approval, too, and the yellers were quite as well armed as Bull—and Bull, incidentally, was no fool. He straightened up abruptly and cried crisply:

"Say! This is all nonsense! We're goin' to take Buckton back, and he's goin' to be tried right and—"

"Cut it out!" said the red-headed member, as he swung down and swaggered over to Buckton and regarded him contemptuously. "Git up!"

The derelict clamored with difficulty to his feet.

"Got any prayers you want to say?" inquired the auburn-haired.

"No!" The word came in an amazing, unexpected roar. "I said 'em long ago!"

"Then—" He caught deftly at the noose and grinned malevolently. "D'ye wanter stand on a hoss, or d'ye wanter be yanked up straight and gentlemanly? Hey?"

"I—" Buckton gulped. Bull, pistols notwithstanding, went forward with a stride.

"You-all!" he thundered. "You ain't goin' t' take this man out of my hands and—"

The seven took to shouting again—and the sheriff all but rubbed his eyes. He had known very well that sentiment was very, very much against Buckton; yet he had most certainly believed that the seven representative men of Phillipstown whom he had picked for the ride were standing for law and order.

Carter, the cold-eyed one, remarked:

"That man's going t' swing, Dick. You just look away and forget it. It'll be over quick. Yer rope ready, Tom?"

"Umum."

"Then—"

"Say! Hold on a minute!" Bull's face was almost startled as he fumbled in an inner pocket. "Just a second. I'll submit, I suppose—and I'll arrest every man jack of you when we get home, but—"

He fumbled further; and he produced a much-soiled envelope that seemed to have gone through many stages of the United States mail service, and he handed it to the wretched Buckton with:

"Here! That came to town for you a month ago, when we were chasing you around Duncan's ranch. I—I said I'd deliver it in person."

It had been rather a grim joke at the time; it was a far grimmer one now, and Bull set his teeth and stared at Buckton and wondered if there was no earthly line of reasoning that could be advanced to save the situation.

Buckton, however, was paying him no attention whatever. One glance at the envelope and the captive's eyes narrowed in a sudden wince. His dry tongue came out and moistened his cracked, hairy lips. His hand shut over the envelope until the thing was crushed into a crinkled mass.

And then Buckton's face grew stony. He tore the thing open carefully—brought forth a folded sheet of notepaper, written from end to end in a fine, thin hand. His head dropped low, until the unlovely chin all but touched the ragged chest. Buckton read on and on and on, oblivious to all else in the world.

At last he raised his head abruptly and, folding the sheet, replaced it carefully in the envelope. He held it forth and thrust it into the hand of the astonished sheriff with:

"Will you do me one last favor? It ain't very much. Won't be any trouble to you."

"Well, if they's anything—"

"Just stick that together again, Bull, with a piece of paper or something. Then mark it 'opened by mistake' and drop it in the mail-box in town. The address is on the back, and it'll get to—where it came from." He paused a little and clasped his hands behind his back, in calm defiance of the coming fate. "'Opened by mistake.' Understand? Yes? Well, then—go on, and be darned to you all!"

Buckton waited, motionless.

Bull seemed rather staggered as the group crowded about him and stared curiously at the letter.

"Well, I'll do that, Buckton—" the sheriff began.

"Aw! Let's see it—". Menken laughed as he snatched the little envelope suddenly and held it aloft.

Buckton started forward with an oath, to be stopped short by Carter's gun. Bull, too, made a move toward the saloon man, but the latter waved the letter over his head and cried:

"Well, we'll make an investigation, Bull. Maybe this here's more evidence, or maybe—"

He broke off again and drew forth the sheet. As he did so Buckton shouted shrilly:

"Put that back, Menken! Put that back, I say! If you don't and I live, I'll kill you; and if I die, I'll come back from hell and haunt you every day of—"

"Girl in the case!" Carter observed facetiously.

Menken, who owned latent dramatic tendencies, had cocked himself jauntily side-saddle on his horse. The little note-sheet was extended now, and Menken's full-throated voice roared forth:

"Listen! Here she goes: 'My dear sonny boy—'"

"She's sure fond of him, ain't she?" the red-haired one chuckled.

Menken read on gleefully:

"My dear sonny boy:

"Do write and tell me what is the matter. It is over a month now since I have heard from you. The last letter you wrote—the one with the fifty dollars and the money-order for one hundred—came on your birthday, and I was very, very glad to hear from you and thank you for the money.

"Have you left your position in Phillipstown and gone back to Laramie? I think maybe it is as well, because you said the Laramie people were good to you and the position was certain, even if the pay was a little less. But you use your own judgment, my dear little boy, because you're your father's son and father always knew what was right and did it, and you are his own boy."

Mr. Menken cleared his throat; his voice had been dropping away noticeably with the last few words. Menken looked almost furtively over the crowd for the tiniest fraction of a second—and the crowd looked back rather bewilderedly. Whereat Menken continued, less jovially:

"Everything is the same here as it has always been. I am just about the same, too, though Dr. Harris said last week I looked some better, though worried. Mr. Welch was asking about you day before yesterday. He said, whenever you get ready to come back, you could have your old place in the store. He said he couldn't pay any more than eleven dollars a week, but he said—he always does—that Insburg is bound to be the biggest town in Indiana within twenty years, and that whoever grows up with his store, will be among the foremost citizens. It made me wish so much that you were back, Neddy. I thought of you all night and wondered if you wouldn't be better home.

"This should reach you by Thursday. Please write as soon as you can and tell me about everything. Good night, my little son.

"Mother."

Menken had read his way to the end. Just now his eyes dropped, and, without comment, he replaced the letter rather carefully and tapped his knee with it.

Nor did the group seem inclined toward hilarious comment. Carter emitted a little snort—and stopped. The red-haired one essayed a contemptuous chuckle, and it died out in rather sickly fashion.

The last puff of wind had died away now, and the silence was intense. Out of it came long, whistling, wheezing breaths from the derelict—big, rasping gasps of pure, infuriated pain. Then:

"Give that letter back to Bull!"

Menken returned it silently.

"And you'll swear to send it off, Bull?"

"I'll sure send it off, Buckton, but—" The sheriff looked at the dry ground for a little while. "But—"

"But what does it mean?" the captive cried. "It means just what it says! It means that my mother's back home in that little town in Indiana, waiting for the black sheep of the family to come back and show that he isn't a black sheep! It means—oh!"

Buckton looked them over almost wildly, and when he spoke the words seemed hardly addressed to the lynching-group.

"My mother brought me up with the idea that I couldn't hit anything less than the Presidency," he said. "I was the only boy, and dad died when I was little. She scrimped and scraped and kept me in school and put me through college when she and the girls didn't have enough to eat. She sent me to New York; and when I made a fizzle there, she got me back home and took me in her arms and told me it'd be all right, and I'd only have to try over again, and that everybody fell down first time and did better for it. She tried to start me right in the town back home; and when I got sore on it, she was the one that raised the cash—God knows how!—to send me out here, to try a new country and make a big hit!" His voice mounted higher and higher. "That's the kind of a mother I had, and by the Almighty, Bull, she's going to believe to the end of her days that I did make that hit!"

Bull was squinting at him. The ragged, whiskered wreck leaned forward, and his glittering eyes grew more intense.

"I came on here, and I didn't make good," he said. "I tried everything, and I hit nothing. Then I got a chance to steal a horse and sell him, and I did—and I sent back the money and told mother I was in a good job. After that I saw a chance at rustling part of a herd, and I cleaned it up quick and sent the money home. And after that—"

He stopped again and licked his lips.

"I guess that's all," he said huskily. "But I want to tell you this: 'My mother's sick. She'll never get well. She may live a year or five years. But she mustn't ever know how or where or why I shuffled off, and she's got to die believing that her only son was the only real article that ever lived. D'ye understand? I've been keeping up the impression by stealing, and, if it's made her any happier, I'm glad of it! I'm glad of it! I'm a bad egg; and if I had it to do over again, maybe I'd be a better one, but—"

He tore open the neck of his ragged shirt and bared his neck to the grisly noose.

Not a man of them moved.

"You'll see that that's mailed, Bull?"

"I certainly will, but——"

"And mark it 'opened by mistake,' and don't sign your name. Mother might come and—" He choked for an instant; then: "Here! Come on and get it over with, will you? Have some mercy on a man!"

Still there was no perceptible movement. The red-headed member avoided looking at the lariat. Instead he turned and walked away a few paces and executed, in private, his trick of rolling a cigarette with one motion of one hand. When the cigarette was lighted, he studied the landscape eastward.

Bull looked at the ground and chewed hard at his mustache. Carter dropped his gun into its ornate holster and examined the trees. The others pursed their lips and spat or smoked or coughed, as pleased them. None of them looked at the prisoner save Menken.

Menken, however, slid down from his horse after some two minutes and walked very slowly toward Buckton. He contemplated the noose, and finally lifted it and cast it away from the neck.

"What 'd ye do if you got back home? Go to work in the store?"

Buckton gasped.

"Ye would, eh?" Menken scratched his head and smiled in a way that Menken very seldom smiled. Menken, in fact, was thinking of the mother he had last seen in Darmstadt, Hesse, some forty years back.

"S'posin' we hadn't found you—s'posin' the cayuse hadn't petered?" he said. "You might 'a' got to Watertank 10, over the ridge there, eh?"

"Yes."

"Might 'a' stopped in Walkins' Falls and got a shave and a decent suit of clothes, if you'd had the price?"

Buckton's eyes brightened queerly.

"Yes."

"Anyway, if you had the price and a horse and twenty-four hours' leeway, there ain't a sheriff could get you," said Menken pensively. "Ain't any doubt about that. Say!"

The group turned suddenly. Menken was fingering a handful of money, and a twenty-dollar gold piece seemed to have separated itself.

"It's a funny coincidence," bellowed Mr. Menken, "but it just occurred to me that every blamed one o' you fellers owes me ten dollars. I'm short just about now. Pay up!"

He didn't wait for them to come to him. He went to them. That was one of the secrets of Menken's moderate wealth. He went to Bull, and Bull handed him two five-dollar coins. He passed to Carter—and Carter scowled—and parted with a gold eagle. He made for the red-headed gentleman, who was prepared and shot a yellow piece at him.

In the course of two minutes Menken was back at Buckton's side and whispering as he proffered the collection:

"You know the trail over the ridge, but you don't know Bull's mind. Beat it!"

"But——"

"Shut up!"

Menken walked away to his own horse. He loosened the short tether and twisted it around the pommel swiftly. He headed the animal toward Buckton and slapped it sharply.

The little beast started on a quick lope. She did not stop, moreover; for as she passed Buckton, Buckton swung into the saddle and drove in what remained of his lonely spur.

And Bull turned suddenly with: "Menken, you blasted idiot——"

Menken took him firmly by the shoulder and faced him eastward.

"Say!" he bellowed. "Did you ever, in all your eternal days, see such a swell reflection of the sunset as a man gets over on those hills? Look! Keep on looking!"

And somewhere behind them, sharp little hoofs clicked rapidly, methodically, as a mare hit the stony trail over the ridge to Walkins' Falls.

THE NERVE OF "NERVES"

By CHARLES FINDLAY CARTWRIGHT

WE were building the spur track which runs north from Martin's Junction to the Dalefield Gold Mines, and we were not having a very pleasant time of it. Young Gorman, who was in charge, was killing himself by day, trying to be in a dozen places at once, and worrying his soul out by night, explaining to the Old Man why he had not accomplished the impossible and run his line across short cuts where the Lord had evidently never intended a railroad should go.

There were several reasons why Gorman was unusually anxious to live up to the Old Man's expectations. In the first place, the Old Man had the name of being a hard master, and he usually lived up to his name. He never accepted excuses from his men. Either they made good, or they failed. Those who failed the Old Man once were never given a chance to fail him a second time, while those who made good under him could count on securing a recommendation which would be taken at its face value anywhere in that part of the country.

Then there was the girl. There is usually a girl in the case when you see a young fellow breaking his neck to make a name for himself, but in Gorman's case it was a little different from the general run. The girl was the Old Man's daughter, and as she was her father's confidante in almost all his affairs, Gorman knew that every good stroke he made carried him one degree higher in her favor; so he got out early and came in late, and seemed to fret because Nature insisted on a few hours sleep each day.

Also, the Old Man had an inkling of how Gorman felt toward his daughter, and if ever one man required brick of another, without furnishing him the straw, the Old Man required it of Gorman on the Dalefield spur. But for all of Gorman's exertions and his doing the work of two men during that spring and summer, the brick would not have been delivered on contract time had it not been for "Nerves."

"Nerves" drifted into camp one evening toward the last of April and asked for a job. He was not a very awe-inspiring figure, but men were hard to get, and harder to keep, so Gorman gave him a pick and sent him down to report to Nixon, who was blasting a thirty-ton boulder off the right of way. And it was there that "Nerves" was christened.

Nixon got his dynamite placed, and ordered his men out of the way while he touched off the fuse. Either the fuse was a little shorter than usual, or Nixon a little slower, but at any rate, before he had got quite out of range, the blast went off. Nixon was knocked down by a piece of flying rock, which cut an ugly gash in his head and left him unconscious for a few seconds.

It really didn't amount to anything. The men crowded around Nixon, who was up almost before they had reached him, and in a few minutes was able to resume his progress toward camp.

However, they had to carry a man back to camp, after all. The new man toppled over almost simultaneously with Nixon, and it was not until after a dozen or so hatfuls of cold water had been dashed in his face that he showed any indications of returning consciousness, and even then he was so weak that he toddled into camp with a man supporting him on each side.

"Where you hit, kid?" Nixon asked anxiously, as soon as the boy opened his eyes.

"I—I'm not hit," he stammered.

"Not hit?" Nixon cried. "Then what the blazes you kickin' up a row about?"

"I think it's my nerves, sir," the boy said weakly.

"Nerves nuthin'!" Nixon roared disgustedly. "Well, come on 'Nerves.' We'll git you back ter camp, an' find you a nice, ladylike job darnin' socks fur the boys. You hadn't oughter be out here with us men. One of us might swear an' shock your nerves."

And that was how "Nerves" came by his name. Probably the paymaster had his real name on the pay-roll, but even he yelled "Nerves" when he called him up for his week's pay, and the rest of us naturally fell into line without making any inquiries.

"Nerves" got along in an inconspicuous sort of way, doing odd jobs about camp for a couple of days, until the Old Man ran up from the Junction to see how the work was progressing, bringing his daughter with him.

The Old Man's visit resulted in an attack of the blues for Gorman, which even the half-hour's chat with the Old Man's daughter was not able to dispel. Half a dozen of our men had quit the previous week and gone up to Dalefield to work in the mines, and Gorman had not been able to replace them. Consequently, our progress had not been all that might have been desired.

The Old Man was not one to ask for excuses, as I have said before. It was only results which interested him. And when the results were not what they should be, he was not at all backward in saying so.

But for 'Nerves,' the Old Man's visit proved a period of unalloyed joy, for he succeeded in attracting the attention of the Old Man's daughter, and their acquaintance grew quickly into a kindly interest on her part and a dog-like devotion on his. After that, Gorman, who was really too busy to notice anything not connected with his work, gave him a kindly word in passing and even put a stop to Nixon's teasing, which was a vast relief.

It was not until the middle of August that the Old Man's visits began to be a source of pleasure to Gorman. By that time, his hard work had begun to tell, and it looked as though we would complete the contract by the middle of September, in time to pick up the fifteen-thousand-dollar bonus for the company, and the Old Man grew almost genial. Gorman was quite a feather in Gorman's cap, for everybody, including Gorman and the Old Man himself (though he did not say so), had thought that Gorman would do well to finish within the time the contract allowed, which was October first.

Gorman was evidently progressing with the girl as favorably as with his work, for the lines gradually began to disappear from his forehead and the worried look from his eyes, and one Sunday he ran down to the Junction and spent the day with her, which was the first real day of rest he had enjoyed since spring.

However, it was the very next day after Gorman's day of rest that our real troubles began. Johnson, one of the sub-bosses, marched his entire squad of nine men over to the Dalefield Mines, then only three miles distant, claiming that he had been offered a dollar a day more than our scale. And the next day a dozen more men left, giving the same reason.

That night Gorman sent "Nerves" down to the Junction with a note for the Old Man, and when he got back the next morning the mystery of the delay was explained. The mining company had offered the railroad, as an inducement to build the twenty-five mile spur track, a cash bonus of fifty thousand dollars, to be paid thirty days from the fifteenth of the month following its completion. This meant thirty days grace to them if they could delay us until after the fifteenth, and as the Dalefield Mining Company was known to be temporarily in financial difficulties, owing to an unexpected panic back East, the delay would get them out of an exceedingly embarrassing position.

The Old Man also added a few lines which, construed into plain English, meant that he expected the Dalefield spur to be completed by the fifteenth, regardless.

Gorman swore softly, muttered something to himself about throwing up the job, which he didn't mean, and then went out and sweated and planned until eleven that night.

When he came in and threw himself into his hammock without undressing, "Nerves" was waiting for him.

"Mr. Gorman," he said, "I'd like to try my hand with a pick again, tomorrow. The cook can get along without me."

"All right, 'Nerves,'" Gorman replied sleepily. "We need all the men we can get right now."

"Nerves" arose, hesitated a moment, and then remarked sheepishly. "She told me to help you all I could, Mr. Gorman."

Gorman sat up. "Hallo, 'Nerves,' are you a victim, too?"

"Nerves" blushed but stuck to his guns.

"She's a mighty fine girl, Mr. Gorman," he said.

Gorman rose. "Right you are 'Nerves.' We'll shake hands on that."

"I suppose you're engaged, aren't you?" "Nerves" asked.

"Well, umph, you're going a little too fast, 'Nerves,'" Gorman laughed. "You see I've got to make a name for myself, first."

"If there's anything I can do to help," "Nerves" ventured.

"Why, thank you, old man, I'll remember that," Gorman replied, and "Nerves" went out.

For a week we heard nothing more of the increase in pay at the Dalefield Mines. Nevertheless, things did not run smoothly. Little things began to happen, calculated to discourage a man and to cause small delays. One morning, one of the big rollers suddenly stopped, and two hours were lost before one of the men found a small nail wedged in against the piston rod.

It was the following Monday that Johnson came back. Gorman always admitted that he made his biggest mistake when he allowed Johnson to go to work that second time. However, we needed every man we could get, and Johnson told an apparently straight story. He claimed that the Dalefield people had paid him what they promised one week and had then reduced him to the old scale.

Johnson didn't try any "monkey" business in the way of tampering with our machinery, or trying to roll rocks down on our engine, and after a couple of days Gorman seemed to forget that he had ever left us. Nevertheless, I did not feel exactly easy, and Nixon was openly suspicious of him. Whether he would have found a chance to harm us or not, if circumstances had not played into his hands, it is hard to say, but the week after he came back something happened which gave him a chance and he took advantage of it.

The "something" happened Saturday, and it was a pretty serious affair in a railroad camp. The cash with which to pay the men failed to arrive. Usually the paymaster and another man went down to the Junction on the engine and brought it up as far as they could, and from there drove over to the camp with it in a buggy. It was always in cash, for there were no banks to cash checks.

This time, however, the paymaster came back without any money. No, he had not been held up. It seems that the Old Man had made arrangements with the bank to forward him, each Friday, to the Junction sufficient money to pay off all his camps. There had been a mistake made somewhere, and the money had failed to reach the Old Man. Some of the camps were inconvenient to reach, and it would be three days, anyway, before the money could be brought to the Junction. Therefore, the Old Man had notified the paymasters not to come back until the following Saturday, when there would be a double pay-day.

Their acquaintance grew quickly.

Our men grumbled a little, as was to be expected, but they seemed to take it good-naturedly enough, and it was not until the last of the week that we noticed any unusual dissatisfaction.

At sundown, the men, instead of dispersing to their shanties as usual, ranged themselves in line and stolidly awaited Gorman's coming. They were evidently in an ugly mood and would make no response to either Nixon's oaths nor my questions; so, finally, we likewise sat down and waited for Gorman to arrive.

He came up about dusk. "What's the trouble?" he asked looking at the men.

"The blankety-blank idiots want to see you about something," Nixon replied.

Gorman went over to the men, and one of them, who knew a little more English than the others, stepped out as spokesman. And then Gorman found out the whole trouble. They wanted their pay. "Meester Yohnson" (Johnson was a Norwegian and still spoke the language) said that the company was "busted" and would pay no more wages. "Meester Yohnson" had told them that they were fools to work when they would get nothing for it. They would work no more until they had their last week's wages.

The best that Gorman could get out of them was a compromise. If he would get the money and pay them for their last week's work that night they would go back to work the next morning. Otherwise they would quit for good.

At seven o'clock, Gorman and myself got into a single-seated buckboard and started down to the Junction after the money. At the last moment "Nerves," who went down on every possible occasion, asked to be allowed to go along, and Gorman finally told him to crawl up behind, which he did, snuggling himself down into the bottom of the buggy as best he could.

Nixon, with his hip-pocket bulging, had gone to look for "Meester Yohnson."

We had two miles to drive before we reached the engine. The other forty odd miles we traveled on the "Jinky."

The money was ready for us at the Junction, and by ten we were in the buckboard again and on our way back to the camp. The swift ride on the "Jinky" had cooled Gorman's anger somewhat, and he was half-dozing over an unlighted cigar and answering in monosyllables to "Nerves," who was talking over the back of the seat, when suddenly two horsemen rode out from behind a boulder and shouted, "Hands up!"

It came so suddenly and the two men were so close that there was nothing to do but obey. My hands went up immediately. Gorman hesitated a moment and made a motion toward his rifle lying across his lap, but one of the men shoved a pistol in his face with a growl, and Gorman, with a groan, also raised his hands. "Nerves" had ducked into the bottom of the buckboard at the first command.

"And now that money you've got," one of the men said, still covering us, while the other reached for the two rifles.

I was just putting my hand under the seat for the money and mentally kicking both Gorman and myself for not having foreseen some such attempt on the part of the Dalefield people, though it was still hard to believe that they would carry matters to such an extent, when from the side of the road came a second command.

"Drop that gun, Johnson." I did not recognize the voice, which was not at all surprising considering the amount of excitement that was crowded into the next few seconds.

The two men wheeled and sent two shots in the direction of the voice.

It was the needed diversion. Our mules sprang forward and I grabbed the lines, trying to keep them in the narrow path which served for a road, while Gorman seized his rifle and sent a half dozen shots in the direction of the horsemen.

It was not until we were within a quarter of a mile of camp that I was able to bring the frightened mules to a standstill. Nixon and five or six Norwegians had already started out to meet us, and together we went back along the road.

There was no sign of the two horsemen, but at the side of the boulder, Nixon stumbled across a body. He struck a match and held it near the face.

"By the Eternal, if it isn't 'Nerves!'" he ejaculated.

"No," Gorman said slowly, "just a plain case of nerve."

The plucky little beggar had slipped out of the back of the buckboard unseen, stolen over to the side of the road, and unarmed, commanded two desperate men to throw up their hands.

For a wonder, he didn't die. We managed to get him back to camp before he bled to death, and a doctor from the Junction did the rest. By the night of the fifteenth, "Nerves" was able to read two telegrams which Gorman brought in for his inspection. The first Gorman had sent, and it read:

"Have finished. Do I win?"

The other was from the girl, and "Nerves's" face lighted up with a peculiar smile, as he read it.

"You win. Gold bless 'Nerves,'" it said.

"Nerves" is now forty years old and assistant general manager of one of the Western lines. He has never married, and I have often wondered—but no, I suppose not. That would savor too much of romance for real life.